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God's call to celibacy for the sake of his Kingdom

On retreat at Mundelein Seminary last week, I prayed for the seminarians who are coming this week to begin or to continue their studies and formation. Central to that personal formation is a deepening of their understanding of celibacy and its relationship to priestly existence.

Celibacy is a way of living full time with the Lord. Because our sexual nature is at the heart of who we are in our bodies and our spirits, the deliberate decision of how to use sexuality as a gift for loving God and others shapes our lives here and our destiny hereafter. If sexuality is not lived as something essentially spiritual as well as profoundly bodily, sex is easily exploited and leads to perversion and corruption. How we deliberately decide to live sexually becomes the act of intention which fashions our whole life. St. Paul explains that those who marry as Christians do well, and those who decide on a life of continence or virginity do better. (1 Cor. 7: 38) The important thing is to decide, under the influence of Christ, how to live generously in both body and spirit.

Christ himself was a celibate man and praised those who remain celibate for the sake of God's Kingdom. (Mt. 19:12) God's faithful, self-giving, covenanted presence to his people creates that Kingdom, in which there will be neither marriage nor giving in marriage. (Mt. 22:30) In the Kingdom, the marriage between God and his people will be finally and completely consummated; and in that infinite love, no other marriage is necessary or possible. Marriage between a man and a woman is until death; celibacy is forever. The Church, which is the Kingdom made visible in this world, needs disciples of Christ who, in closer imitation of him, give witness now to the way in which we will all live forever. Celibacy is at the heart of radical discipleship; it is necessary to the Church's mission as the sacrament of God's Kingdom.

Throughout the ages, from apostolic times, the Church has therefore treasured those who have been given the grace to live celibacy faithfully. Virgins were honored with martyrs in the early centuries of persecution. Most honored were those who, like Saints Agnes, Agatha and Caecilia, were both virgins and martyrs. In both their living and their dying, they gave total witness to God's Kingdom. Since apostolic times, the Church has protected the gift of celibacy by vows and promises, just as she protects marriage. Sometimes a vow of celibacy is made privately, with the advice of one's confessor or spiritual director. Sometimes it is made in the framework of a secular institute approved by the Church. Sometimes it is professed in the community of a religious order, with a rule of life approved by the Church. All of these are forms of consecrated life, building on one's baptismal promises to live as faithful disciples of Christ and drawing one, through further vows, into a deeper way of following the Lord.

The Church, from apostolic times, has also associated celibacy with ordained priesthood. Since ordination marries a man to Christ's bride, the Church, it makes sense to call to ordained priesthood only those who have also been called by Christ to celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom. The discipline of the Latin Church, reaffirmed in the Second Vatican Council and in the Synods on priesthood since the Council, is summed up in the 1983 Code of Canon Law, which

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speaks of the priest's obligation to observe "perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven." (Canon 271) Celibacy is described as "a special gift of God by which sacred ministers can more easily remain close to Christ with an undivided heart and can dedicate themselves more freely to the service of God and their neighbor."

This teaching and discipline are maintained, despite considerable cultural pressure for change, because they are rooted in the Church's history. At times, one hears from interested parties that priestly celibacy was optional for a thousand years and became obligatory only at the end of the first millennium. On the contrary, the first Church Synod to speak of priestly celibacy met in 305 (Elvira) and set out what were called the "traditional" rules. These forbade married bishops, priests and deacons to have sexual relations with their wives and to procreate children. That these were the unwritten rules from generations back, presupposing that married men who presented themselves for ordination must have worked out an agreement with their wives before accepting ordination, is fairly evident. What married man would dare come back from a meeting to tell his wife for the first time that they could no longer live together as husband and wife! The first Ecumenical Council (Nicea, 325) upheld the tradition of celibacy for both married and unmarried clergy. And so it went through the ages. The Eastern Churches modified the apostolic tradition in 692 (Trullo); and that discipline is respected by the Holy See. Rome, however, still calls the entire Church back to a tradition that has marked priestly life from the earliest times: "It deeply hurts us that ... anyone can dream that the Church will deliberately or even suitably renounce what from time immemorial has been, and still remains, one of the purest and noblest glories of her priesthood." These are the words of Pope John XXIII (January 26, 1960).

All that being said, celibacy doesn't seem so glorious when the media are filled with the scandal of priests betraying their promises, especially when a child is sexually victimized. Nor does celibacy seem so glorious when so many priests have left their calling to marry and when stories of the psychological isolation and frustration of some priests shape popular opinions. Celibacy seems like a burden from an earlier time which is unnecessarily and even immorally imposed upon priests who would otherwise be happy in their life and ministry. Celibacy causes resentments of all sorts just because it challenges so much of what we take for granted as necessary for human happiness.

Finally, of course, that is its evangelical purpose. There are other stories, not often heard these days. Talk to priests who find their own spiritual strength in their cooperating as celibate men with Christ for the salvation of his people. There are many such stories. They are not only true in themselves; they speak the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who was born of a virgin mother and himself lived only for the Kingdom he proclaimed. That is the Kingdom we all pray to enter each time we say the Lord's Prayer. God bless you.
Sincerely yours in Christ,

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